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Türkiye and the Russia-Ukraine War

Impact on the West, Central Asia, and the Caucasus

Matthew Bryza

During a recent webinar, I was asked to address the following question: what does Russia's invasion of Ukraine mean for Türkiye's approach to the Caucasus and Central Asia?

At first, the question struck me as odd. Having worked on these issues since the late 1990s and now living in Istanbul, it seemed obvious to me that Türkiye's goals in these regions have been enduring since the end of the Cold War and were not changing because of Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine. These goals, I said, were and remain to: secure westward exports of oil and

natural gas produced in the Caspian Basin; promote stability in the South Caucasus; and strengthen Türkiye's business and cultural ties with the Turkic populations of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Türkiye's approach toward Russia in this context also remains what it has been since the Ottoman centuries: cooperate where possible but confront where necessary.

Reflecting momentarily on this question, however, I realized how different Ankara's goals appear from the perspectives

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of Washington, Paris, and Athens. In these and other NATO capitals, Turkish foreign policy seems to have shifted from its pursuit of “zero problems with neighbors” during the early years of the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan to one of “zero neighbors without problems.”

Türkiye is thus viewed within the Atlantic Alliance as a belligerent outlier, bent on violating international law to pursue the extraction of Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbons, enabling Azerbaijan to use military force during the Second Karabakh War, and aligning in Syria more with Russia than with its own treaty allies.

Vigorous Shift

Indisputably, Türkiye's foreign policy did indeed shift toward a vigorous pursuit of its rights approximately six years ago. This change, however, is largely in the past and was driven not by a national penchant for aggression, but rather by two traumatic events that shook the foundations of Turkish foreign policy.

Türkiye's foreign policy shifted toward a vigorous pursuit of its rights approximately six years ago and was driven by two traumatic events now largely in the past.

First, Türkiye's coup attempt on 15-16 July 2016 was a political earthquake, prompting tectonic changes in Ankara's thinking. Though some Western observers scoffed at the coup attempt as bungled and perhaps even encouraged by Erdogan to provide a pretext for political repression, Turkish citizens across the political spectrum—even Erdogan's staunchest opponents—saw something far different. They observed a series of harrowing and deadly attacks by members of a politico-religious cult who had infiltrated Türkiye's military, police, and judiciary over the course of two decades. This included aerial bombardment of the Turkish Parliament by Air Force F-16 fighter jets; the storming of Türkiye's state television station by commandos who compelled a terrified presenter to declare their coup; and armored troop columns that attempted to seize Istanbul's Bosphorus bridges and main international airport. Another group of F-16s reportedly attempted to shoot down Erdogan's presidential aircraft. In the end, 251 everyday Turkish citizens, who blocked army tanks in a show of

“people power” in defense of their democracy were killed and 2,200 were injured.

Turkish suspicion, regardless of political affiliation, immediately turned toward the United States. The leader of the organization that carried out the coup attempt, Fetullah Gulen, is a reclusive cleric who received U.S. legal residency in 1999. How could it be, Turks wondered aloud, that a U.S. resident alien whose extradition Ankara had repeatedly sought could lead a coup attempt in Türkiye from an isolated compound in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, all without Washington’s knowledge? And if senior U.S. officials were aware of the burgeoning coup attempt but did nothing to stop it, that would be even worse.

Senior U.S. officials initially fed these Turkish suspicions. Rather than unequivocally condemning an attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government of a long-standing NATO ally, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry first called for “stability and peace and continuity within Türkiye.” Two days later, Kerry seemed to threaten Türkiye with possible expulsion from NATO if Erdogan cracked down too severely on the coup plotters, warning that “NATO also has a requirement with respect to democracy,

and NATO will indeed measure very carefully what is happening.” A few days later, referring to Ankara’s arrest of hundreds of Turkish military officers for allegedly participating in the coup attempt, Commander of the U.S. Central Command General Joseph Votel noted, “I am concerned that it will impact the level of cooperation and collaboration that we have with Türkiye, which has been excellent, frankly.”

Such statements provided Russian President Vladimir Putin with an opening in Ankara. He did not miss his chance. The day after the coup attempt was put down, and ahead of any NATO leader, Putin called Erdogan to express solidarity, citing the “categorical unacceptability in the life of a state of anti-constitutional acts and violence.” Rumors abound that Putin also told Erdogan that Washington was behind the coup attempt and offered to send Russian *spetznaz* commandos to Türkiye should they be needed to suppress the vestiges of the coup attempt. In the following months, Erdogan’s and Putin’s relations blossomed, and 17 months after Putin’s supportive phone call, Erdogan agreed to purchase Russia’s S-400 air defense system.

This decision by the leader of NATO’s second largest military to acquire Russia’s most capable air

defense system, which uses a highly sophisticated military intelligence platform, sent shockwaves throughout the Atlantic Alliance and ultimately led to U.S. sanctions against Türkiye. In Ankara, however, it seemed Erdogan might need an anti-aircraft system designed to shoot down the F-16s that had targeted both him and the Turkish Parliament.

The second traumatic event that prompted Türkiye’s more assertive foreign policy was the collapse of UN-brokered negotiations regarding Cyprus in June 2017. Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders, together with the “Guarantor Powers” (i.e., Türkiye, Greece, and the United Kingdom), had gathered in Crans-Montana, Switzerland, under the good offices of the United Nations, hoping to secure an agreement to reunify the island into a bizonal and bi-communal federation and thus end five decades of intercommunal conflict. After the talks collapsed without an agreement, both sides (e.g., the Turkish Cypriots and Türkiye versus the Greek Cypriots and Greece) accused each other of torpedoing the talks.

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A senior United Nations participant in the negotiations subsequently told the author that for the first time ever, Türkiye was prepared in Crans-Montana to accede to the two most im-

portant Greek Cypriot demands: *one*, Türkiye would renounce its right to intervene in Cypriot affairs, which it acquired via the 1960 treaties granting the island independence from the United Kingdom and establishing the Republic of Cyprus; and *two*, Türkiye would eventually remove all troops from the island.

Greek Cypriot leaders vehemently deny Türkiye offered these two points. Senior Turkish officials, on the other hand, told the author that once Greek Cypriot leaders rejected this offer, they concluded it would be politically infeasible for any Greek Cypriot government to agree to any compromise at any point in the future.

Türkiye responded with a vigorous assertion of its rights (as it defines them) in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 2018, Türkiye’s national oil company, TPAO, began drilling for oil and gas in Eastern Mediterranean waters claimed

both by Ankara and Nicosia. This outraged the Greek Cypriot authorities, who appealed to their EU partners for solidarity in condemning what they termed as Türkiye's violation of international law.

TPAO, however, had refrained from such actions for eight years after international oil companies began drilling under licenses issued by the Greek Cypriot government in waters also claimed by Türkiye. Ankara was trying to provide political space for the UN-brokered talks on a Cyprus settlement, despite profound disagreement with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) claimed by both Greek Cypriot and Greek authorities, which reduce Türkiye's own EEZ so dramatically as to exclude most of the richest oil and natural gas prospects in the Eastern Mediterranean.

When Cyprus talks collapsed in Crans-Montana in the summer of 2017, however, Ankara gave permission to TPAO to begin planning for hydrocarbon exploration in these disputed Eastern Mediterranean waters. Türkiye simultaneously shifted its underlying goal for Cyprus from reunification of the island to a two-state solution.

In response, Cyprus and its EU allies condemned Türkiye for acting illegally, refusing to consider Ankara's interpretation of

international maritime law while categorically dubbing TPAO's exploration activity illegal. France led the EU charge, even sending fighter jets to the Greek island of Crete, while in July 2020, Ankara deployed naval vessels to escort TPAO's hydrocarbon exploration ship in waters claimed by Athens. Greece responded with its own navy ships to shadow the Turkish warships.

Within a few weeks, a Turkish and a Greek warship collided, bringing the two NATO allies to the brink of armed conflict. This led NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to step in, brokering an agreement between Ankara and Athens to deconflict their naval operations. Simultaneously, German Chancellor Angela Merkel intervened with Erdogan on behalf of the entire EU and persuaded Türkiye's president to withdraw TPAO's exploration ships from the Eastern Mediterranean. Until this moment of writing in mid-June 2022, no TPAO exploration ships have subsequently operated in the Eastern Mediterranean.

De-escalatory Mindset

The collision of Turkish and Greek warships was a watershed for Türkiye, underscoring that its pugnaciousness in the Eastern

Mediterranean was counterproductive. Ankara was further nudged toward de-escalation by the defeat of U.S. President Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election in November

2020, which signaled that America's "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran—the centerpiece of Trump's approach to the Middle East—would soon be supplanted by U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's quest to find common ground with Tehran to restore the Iran nuclear deal.

Further momentum for a general lowering of tensions throughout the Middle East was generated by the onset of the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations *inter alia* between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, both of which were estranged from Türkiye at the time. Finally, Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the Second Karabakh War removed a major source of geopolitical tension for Türkiye in the South Caucasus.

Subsequent to those events, Türkiye began to pursue a normalization of its relations with Armenia, Israel, and the UAE, as well as with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Turkish Foreign Minister

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Mevlut Cavusoglu's visit to Israel on 25 May 2022—despite Israeli security services' killing of Al Jazeera's renown Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh exactly two weeks earlier—

was a particularly significant sign of resolve to restore relations with Israel, given that previous killings of Palestinians had prompted Ankara's intense protests, and even the rupture of Türkiye-Israel relations in June 2010 following the Mavi Marmara incident.

The Turkish Government was therefore in a de-escalatory mindset when Russia invaded Ukraine (again) on 24 February 2022. Over the preceding months, senior officials in Ankara had been publicly emphasizing their conception of Türkiye as a stabilizing force in the world. They depicted Türkiye's armed clashes with Russian troops in north-west Syria and Libya in 2020 as preventing the slaughter of civilians and preserving the rule of law. Similarly, Türkiye's military support of Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent deployment of peacekeepers to the country after the Second Karabakh War to the

Russia-Türkiye Joint Monitoring Center were described as restoring international legal norms while providing NATO with “eyes and ears” on the ground to deter the Russian peacekeeper contingent from stoking instability in Azerbaijan, as they have done in Georgia and Moldova.

This de-escalatory mindset helps explain why Ankara has sought to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow. Additionally, Türkiye has significant economic interests with both Russia (natural gas and nuclear energy, tourism, agricultural exports, and tourism) and Ukraine (military technology and tourism).

Consistency of Approach

Türkiye is therefore following the same approach toward Russia and the Black Sea region as it has throughout the past six centuries: confront Russia when necessary but cooperate where possible (as noted above). Concretely, Ankara has consistently condemned the Kremlin’s annexation of

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Crimea, Russia’s invasions of Ukraine, and Moscow’s violations of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Moreover, Ankara has closed the Turkish Straits to Russian (and other countries’) warships that are not based at Black Sea ports, in accordance with the 1936 Montreux Convention.

Türkiye also remains one of NATO’s staunchest supporters of Alliance membership not only for Ukraine, but for Georgia as well. And Ankara is providing Kyiv crucial military technologies, especially Bayraktar TB-2 drones that have played a crucial role in helping Ukraine’s military to confront Russia’s attacks and even to sink the cruiser Moskva (the flagship of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet). At the same time, Ankara and Erdogan have avoided incendiary rhetoric toward Moscow and Putin, which has created space for Türkiye to serve as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

Both Moscow and Kyiv have welcomed Türkiye’s mediation. Cavusoglu presided over a meeting of his Ukrainian and

Russian counterparts, Dmytro Kuleba and Sergey Lavrov (respectively), on the margins of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in March 2022. A follow up meeting in Istanbul a week later yielded the outlines of a potential ceasefire agreement: Russia would withdraw its forces that invaded Ukraine since 24 February 2022; Ukraine would declare its neutrality and drop its NATO ambition; and the question of the legal status of the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia in Crimea and Donbass would be deferred for 15 years. While Ukraine announced its acceptance of this formula, Russia did not, as Putin appears to prefer to try to seize more Ukrainian territory in Donbass.

Türkiye’s interests in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, meanwhile, have been largely unaffected by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Turkish peacekeepers remain on the ground in Azerbaijan, keeping NATO’s eyes on the significantly larger Russian contingent, which, fortunately, continues to play a constructive role in mitigating armed provo-

cations between the Azerbaijani military and Armenian irredentist forces operating within the Russian peacekeeping zone in a part of Karabakh.

Türkiye is also continuing discussions with Armenia on normalizing relations, while supporting Baku’s efforts to reach a peace treaty with Yerevan. And in a broader strategic sense, Türkiye continues to fill one half of the strategic vacuum on Azerbaijan’s behalf, which was left by the West in general and the U.S. in particular, when there was a failure to respond to armed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan on their international border in July 2020; Russia fills the other half of the vacuum on Armenia’s behalf.

In Central Asia, Türkiye’s efforts to secure westward exports of natural gas from Turkmenistan (including via Iran) and to strengthen cultural and business ties with Turkic populations continues unabated. The upgrading of the Turkic Council into the Organization of Turkic States in November 2021

underscores Ankara's commitment to bolstering ties with other Turkic countries.

The visit of Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, to Ankara in May 2022—five months after he requested Russian troops to suppress a violent uprising and then arranged for them to leave less than fortnight later—underscored how both Kazakhstan and Türkiye are working together to maintain regional stability, anticipating that Putin will likely continue muscle-flexing in the region either because he will feel empowered by a victory in Ukraine or sense a need to project enduring power if/when Russia suffers defeat. Uzbekistan is a key field of competition, with Moscow trying to thwart President Shavkat Mirzoyoyev's efforts to advance economic reforms and pull the Central Asian giant back into Russia's orbit.

Türkiye's ambitions to play a stabilizing role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia in opposition to a revisionist Russia are an important asset for the

United States and all of NATO. This is also true in Afghanistan, where Türkiye has kept open its embassy, offering NATO a crucial intelligence platform and means of influencing the Taliban regime. Türkiye is also committed to developing multi-modal transportation routes linking the Arabian, Black, and Mediterranean Seas, which could play a crucial role in

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enabling Central Asian grain, fertilizer, and natural gas to reach global markets and mitigate the risks of famine in the Global South and energy shortages in Europe resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Ankara is unlikely to step to the diplomatic forefront in the context of Afghanistan, however, unless encouraged to do so by Washington and other NATO capitals.

Formidable Obstacle

As Türkiye's 2023 national elections approach, both President Erdogan and his political opponents will be tempted to play the nationalist card and return

to a more confrontational foreign policy. While NATO Allies have no obligation to rescue Türkiye from its own parochialism, they do have a shared interest in reinforcing Ankara's recent inclination to support the alliance's collective interests that stretch from the

Arabian and Caspian to the Black and Mediterranean Seas. Türkiye will thus be willing to follow a positive lead from its Allies, but domestic politics will likely remain a formidable obstacle in NATO capitals, especially Washington and Paris. **BD**

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